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ABSTRACT

Included in the many problems of current televangelism which are cause for concern are the constant appeals for donations. Under current circumstances, with tremendous sums of money needed to use television for religious purposes, televangelists resort to sensationalism for mass appeal rather than to spreading the gospel. This ethical problem could be alleviated by having local television stations provide free air time for religious programming, during which no appeals for funds would be allowed. Shut-ins and others would still receive spiritual blessings; televangelists would not need to seek high ratings to stay on the air. Another concern is that the religious fervor of the fundamentalist televangelists leads to exclusionary rhetoric which has numerous negative consequences. Exclusionary rhetoric argues that there is only one path to salvation and denies tolerance for other beliefs and lifestyles. It promotes religious and secular bigotry in which the "saved" are better than those who are not saved. It also creates a religious caste system in which the concept of attending the "right" church suggests that the other churches are wrong. The positive side of televangelism can be seen best in the work of Billy Graham. (KEH)

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TELEVANGELISM
AND
THE RHETORIC OF EXCLUSION

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"The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." This phrase may accurately describe the efforts behind the writing of this paper. My original intent was to develop the thesis that religion and television were partners in an unholy marriage, resulting in a distortion of theology. In my research I came across an article in the March 18, 1988 Christianity Today entitled, "Balance or Bias: Must TV distort the Gospel?" The author, Quentin J. Schultze, makes my argument very persuasively. The following paragraph is an efficient summary of his position:

> Nothing offers greater chance for such self-justifying opportunism than contemporary televangelism. In the name of Christ, some televangelists practice a style of 'holy deception' that distorts the gospel, legitimizes lavish lifestyles, and approves of direct-mail chicanery. These are not isolated phenomena. They happen every day in the religious fund-raising letters sent to contributors and in the entertaining performances conducted on television (p. 32).

Professor Schultze concludes that, "The church should be outraged by the unethical practices of its members, speaking forcefully and directly against wrong and inappropriate practices (p. 32)." Since I obviously find myself in agreement with this statement I c ould go on to review the article in detail. That would not only be elementary, it could be construed as plagarism.

Rather than dwell on theproblems of televangelism (and there are many), this paper centers around two alternative themes. First, I present a modest proposal to cure the illness afflicting religious television. The second section of the paper contains some thoughts

on religious fundamentalism in general, and televised fundamentalism in particular.

Prior to these two discussions, I feel it is important to issue a disclaimer. Religion holds a special place in many of our lives. I in no way intend to be critical of a person's right to believe (or not to believe) in a particular vision of the Almighty. It is my firm belief that religion plays a significant role in the development of ethics and morals.

However, I have another firm belief that we humans should question our selves, our world and our institutions. If I did not believe this I would be a traitor to the educational tradition behind my Ph.D. - a tradition which includes Augustine and Aquinas and also Socrates and Aristotle. Some have argued that questioning is the essence of original sin; I reason that it is a gift from God.

The Proposal

It is evident that there are difficulties caused by the current state of televangelism. To be successful, televangelists must attract and hold a large audience, since television stations depend upon market share for their livelihood. The medium almost demands a sensational approach for success.

Yet it is not neccessarily the sensationalism which is the cause of televangelism"s problems. Although I find it difficult to believe that Pat Robertson really does feel someonebeing healed of diabetes in Peoria, some people do believe in this power and have the right to do so. It is money which is the primary cause for concern: specifically, the constant appeals for donations for all sorts of programs. This need for funds is in part driven by the high cost of producing and purchasing time for religious programming.

What is the purpose of religious programming? In many ways it is a service to those who cannot, for whatever reason, attend church. Of course, televangelists state that the medium is also used to spread the gospel. Both of these purposes can be noble goals. The problem under current circumstances is that tremendous sums of money are needed to use television for religious purposes.

The plan of action is really quite simple:

1. Local stations will provide free air time for religious programming. Three hours per week will be allotted, with at least one hour on Sunday mornings between 8 AM and noon.

2. No appeals for funds will be allowed during these religious programs. At the end of the program a simple message will be presented: "If you would like to contribute to the ministry of _____, please send your contributions to the following address:..."

3. Any person appealing for funds during the program will result in the forteiture of free air time.

This plan preserves the positive purposes of televising religious services while doing away with the primary ethical problem. If televangelists are truly concerned with spreading the word of God they may do so at little or no expense. Shut-ins and others will still be able to receive spiritual blessings. There will be no need for sensationalsim, since ratings will not be a factor for the local television stations.

Religious broadcasting can serve as a positive social force. Mired in its current ethical quagmire it is doing theology a disservice. This plan should correct some of the flaws inherent in the current situation by changing that situation at its roots.

Thoughts on Religious Fundamentalism

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, fundamentalism is "A Protestant movement characterized by a belief in the literal truth of the Bible." The same dictionary defines evangelism as, "The zealous preaching and dissemination of the gospel, as through missionary work; Militant zeal for a cause." While dictionary definitions rarely tell the entire story, these basic explanations are used simply to clarify the use of these terms throughout the remainder of this essay.

Fundamentalism and evangelizing are not negative in their dictionary sense. The difficulty arises when fundamentalism is evangelized with militant zeal, specifically, when it gives rise to exclusionary rhetoric.

The rhetoric of exclusion is based on the concept that, to be "saved" one must believe the same faith as the evangelical. This is not the same thing as the religious move to convert individuals to a particular faith. It is instead the lack of tolerance for other religious beliefs. Such exlusionary rhetoric runs against the principles of democracy upon which this nation is based. It is also, I would argue, against everything that religion should stand for.

Exclusionary rhetoric denies tolerance for other beliefs and lifestyles. It argues that there is but one path to salvation, and those who do not follow that path are doomed. Rather than preach understanding, it preaches intolerance. Rather than revelling in the diversity of God's creation, it attempts to deny the value of variety. In doing so it mocks the glory of creation. It essentially is based on the premise that the Almighty

cannot tolerate alternative methods of leading a good life. In so doing, it suggests that God has made an error by allowing such diversity of belief and that certain individuals have been annointed to rectify that error by proclaiming one absolute faith.

Another consequence of this exclusionary rhetoric is that it promotes religious and secular bigotry. It suggests that those that are saved are "better" than those who are not saved. The creation of this theological "underclass" can have devastating practical consequences. For example, there are fundamentalists who argue that the AIDS virus is God's way of getting even with homosexuals for their sins. This position would be laughable if it were not so tragic. The essence of the position is that it is OK for homosexuals to die because they have deviated from some religious norms. They are to blame for the plague and thus deserve whatever they get. How is that different from Hitler arguing that, since Jews were responsible for the ills of Wiermacht Germany they deserve what they get?

Exclusionary rhetoric can also create a religious caste system. The concept of attending the "right" church suggests that the other churches are wrong. While this issue is difficult enough in the United States, the international ramifications are staggering. It suggests that many foreign cultures with different religious heritages are somehow inferior. The resulting "White Man's Burden"mentality denies the inherent worth of other cultures.

For example, in the United States we have long ago denied the beliefs of the Native Americans, denigrating their religons as "pagan." Yet central to the core of much of their faith is

a respect for the earth. Given the alarming problem of pollution, perhaps we have something to learn from Native American religious beliefs. But when we create a religious caste system we deny the value of the "wrong" faith.

Televised evangelism has contributed to this problem. The political influence of the evangelical movement, led by several famous television preachers, was given credit for the election of President Reagan. If this is true, and from all indications it seems to have been a major part of Reagan's success, then it demonstratesthe political clout of televangelists.

When televangelism is used to bring people together by preaching tolerance and understanding it can be a wonderful social force. But when it is used to divide us it can have a significant negative impact on society. Books are burned in the name of God. Attitudes toward women deny them equality with men. Discrimination toward minorities, both ethnic and religious, is not only justified, it is encouraged.

There are numerous negative consequences when religious fervor leads to exclusionary rhetoric. Such rhetoric is at its roots quite selfish, since it is based upon the idea that the rhetor knows the Truth.

It seems to me that television and religion have had a rocky marriage. Religious broadcasting has preached fairness, equality and tolerance in its better moments. It has also demonstrated extreme greed while at times serving as a divisive force in our society.

There is a positive side to televangelism. It is probably best seen in the work of Billy Graham. In the spirit of ecumenism, he recently wrote: "I was brought up as a Presbyterian and later became a Baptist. But in later years I have felt that I belong to all churches...God did not invent denominations, man did (Christianity Today, March 18, 1988, p. 60)." There is a certain amount of common sense in that statement. It suggests an understanding of diversity and an acknowledgement that different paths toward the same destination are allowed. The focus is on the ultimate destination, not the route by which we get there. Amen.